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David Stevenson. *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904-1914.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. xi + 463 pp. \$89.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820208-0.



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The focus of David Stevenson's *Armaments and the Coming of War* is the role of the armaments policies of the great powers in the breakdown of international equilibrium between 1904 to 1914. The breadth of this study is sweeping. Dr. Stevenson, who is a senior lecturer at the London School of Economics, has consulted a formidable array of archives ranging from the private records of the Krupp industrial empire to state archives in Belgium, Italy, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Austria-Hungary. He has also made an exhaustive survey of the relevant secondary literature, including works published in Russian. The result is a book which should become a landmark in the historiography of the origins of the First World War.

Stevenson's synthesis of extensive archival research, historiography, and contemporary international relations theory provides a stimulating and original perspective on the coming of war in 1914. While the impressive body of scholarship emphasizing the domestic origins of the conflict is by no means ignored, the focus of analysis is shifted back to the international arena. The author's central argument is that perceptions of the balance of power among European military and civilian elites were transformed between 1904 and 1914. The key element in this transformation was a land arms race between the Franco-Russian and Austro-German alliance blocs which gained

momentum after 1910. By 1914 the leadership of both German and Austria-Hungary had concluded that they were involved in a long term armaments race that they could not win. At the same time, their counterparts in France and Russia were willing to accept the risk of war in order to avoid diplomatic defeat. This was a dangerous confluence of perceptions which ultimately exploded into world war.

There is a welcome integration of international relations theory concerning arms races, crisis management and the "security dilemma." Stevenson distinguishes between different arms races. There was the celebrated naval race between Great Britain and Germany; the land and naval competition between Austria-Hungary and Italy; and a seemingly perpetual arms race between various states in the Balkans. But the crucial competition in armaments involved the Franco-Russian alliance on one hand and the combination of Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other. This arms race was the most dangerous because it was between two continental power blocs. As it intensified, however, it became ever more deadly because, as Stevenson observes, some types of armament "bring the security dilemma into play more than do others" (p. 13). And after 1910 the evolving inter-bloc arms race came to focus increasingly on short-term ("hair-trigger") military preparedness as opposed to

medium or long term re-organization or re-equipment.

Various interpretations of the causes of arms races are considered. The “action-reaction model”, which stresses the leap-frogging effect that armaments spending can have among rival states, is unsatisfactory because it cannot explain why the process starts in the first place. The “domestic-structure model,” which places decisive emphasis on the internal factors driving defence policy, is also shown to be insufficient on its own. The widespread notion that the pre-war arms race was brought about by the machinations of “military-industrial complexes” fails to explain how the “merchants of death” (private armaments manufacturers) and their alleged military collaborators prevailed over opposing groups in society which wished to cut public expenditure, decrease taxes, and reduce or abolish conscription. Similarly, the thesis that the war was caused by regimes seeking to divert public attention away from desperate conditions at home has only limited value. As Stevenson points out, “in pre-1914 Europe countries that were extremely varied in their domestic politics expanded their armaments more or less simultaneously” (p. 13). Nor is the “technological imperative model” able to explain the arms build-up. This model, which holds that advances in science and technology drive arms races forward by forcing states to keep up with the latest military innovations abroad, does not fit with the nature of the pre-1914 build-up. During the final three years of peace it was advances in short-term readiness (which meant larger standing armies rather more sophisticated weaponry) that most exacerbated international tension.

Stevenson concludes that, while each of the above theoretical approaches has something to offer, external stimuli were most important in fuelling the great armaments build-up under consideration. In an informative and insightful chronological narrative, the book follows the course of European politics from the first confrontation over Morocco to the July Crisis in 1914. Stevenson argues that the crises over Morocco in 1905-1906 and Bosnia in 1908-1909 did not lead to conflict because war was not an acceptable option for any of the powers. France and Russia were not strong enough to challenge Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Central Powers, therefore, did not perceive a vital threat to their continental position. The key development which overturned this “equilibrium” was the “spectacular recovery” of the Russian economy beginning in 1908. Annual growth of more than seven per cent during this period freed up funding for armaments expenditure and set the stage for a dramatic re-organization of the Russian army in

1910. Stevenson argues persuasively that “Developments in Russia between 1908 and 1912 undermined the military equilibrium not only in eastern Europe but in Europe as a whole: in the land arms race the government in St. Petersburg can most justifiably be said to have fired the first shot ... although it is doubtful it realized what it was doing” (p. 146). From this point forward military and civilian elites in both Germany and Austria-Hungary began to fear that the ever-increasing power of Russia would pose an unanswerable challenge to their status as Great Powers. The second Moroccan Crisis of 1911 exacerbated these fears because it tightened the Franco-Russian alliance and strengthened the *entente* between France and Great Britain. The crisis was also important because Britain, France and Germany first made recourse to “armed diplomacy” by undertaking measures preliminary to mobilization in order to strengthen their negotiating positions.

Armed diplomacy was much more pronounced during the series of wars and crises in the Balkans in 1912-1913. Both Russia and Austria-Hungary exhibited an unprecedented willingness to call up reservists and to retain conscripts past their release date in order to add muscle to their diplomacy. Tension in the east spread to the west as the powers within the two great alliance blocs drew ever closer together. “War Councils” and “trial mobilizations” were new factors in crisis management which dramatically increased the likelihood of conflict. Even more important was the crucial impact of the Balkan wars (1912-1913) on the arms race. Stevenson refers to the “Balkan ignition” to the “Great Acceleration” after 1912. The chief lesson learned was that “war preparedness” was an essential component of diplomacy. In an “action-reaction” spiral, all of the continental powers took ambitious measures to enhance their peacetime strength. There were three key steps to this process. The first was the German army bill of 1913, which was conceived in order to ensure victory for Germany in a war against France and Russia. The second was the French decision to extend the length of conscript service to three years (the Three Year Law), aimed at raising the peacetime strength of the French army to a level approaching that of the German Imperial Army. Even more fatal for the peace of Europe, however, were Russian plans for a “Great Programme” which by 1918 would raise the peacetime strength of the Russian army to 800,000.

Stevenson traces the impact of these developments on perceptions of the balance of power across Europe. He argues persuasively that the essential factor in the July Crisis was the perception among elites in both Vienna

and Berlin that the Central Powers were involved in an arms race which they could not win. The German general staff, for example, calculated that Russian military power would begin to eclipse that of Germany by 1917. This meant that a “window” was available to the Central Powers in which they could fight a Franco-German combination with a reasonable chance of victory. Stevenson demonstrates that, during the same period, the confidence of military and civilian leaders in Paris and St. Petersburg also increased to the point where they too could envisage the possibility of war with good prospects of victory. The result was a crucial change in attitudes toward war in general and, in the case of Austria and Germany, *preventative* war in particular. Stevenson provides overwhelming evidence that, “For both [Germany and Austria-Hungary] before Sarajevo preventative war was considered only as one possible option. But that it was considered is not in doubt” (p. 363).

The European balance of power had reached a “cross-over point” where the ascendancy of French and Russian power corresponded roughly to the relative decline of the Austro-German combination. He argues that such points are dangerous because one side is tempted to fight before it becomes eclipsed by the other. During the July 1914 crisis none of the powers were aiming at a general European conflagration. Neither was one power bloc willing to give way to the other. Stevenson concludes that the crucial decisions for war or peace were taken in Berlin. What is interesting is that he also demonstrates that the assumption upon which these decisions were based, that the Central Powers could not win in a lengthy arms race, was essentially correct. Thus, given the thinking about diplomacy and armaments which prevailed throughout the European capitals during this period, German policy during the July Crisis becomes somewhat more comprehensible.

The strengths of this book are many. It is well-organized, based on a truly colossal research effort, and it is well-written. Most impressive of all is Stevenson’s analysis of the constant interplay between perceptions of the strategic situation on the one hand and the making of foreign and defence policy on the other. The constantly evolving dynamic between perceptions and policy-making explains why armaments were at once a symptom and a cause of the tension in international politics before 1914.

It is difficult, and yet all too easy, to raise minor objections when reviewing any study of this scope. One is tempted to argue that the “domestic model” receives

short shrift in Stevenson’s analysis of the deeper causes of the armaments competition. By concentrating on the role of changing perceptions of the international situation, Stevenson is able to chart the steady erosion of internal obstacles to armaments expenditure within the various states. But this analysis can only go so far in explaining why these perceptions changed so radically during the period in question. For example, decisive importance is attributed to the Russian recovery of 1909-1910. This paved the way for the accelerated industrialization and modernization of Russia’s armed forces which so disrupted the European strategic equilibrium. But what was driving Russian policy? Why did the Russians decide to devote such effort to expanding their armed forces? As Stevenson admits, among all the ruling elites in Europe during this period, Russia’s was probably most influenced by fears of domestic unrest. But the author does not address the question of what role these fears played in radicalizing Russia’s foreign and defence policies.

It is also a testament to Stevenson’s scholarship that his book raises a host of interesting questions which merit further consideration. One of these is the role of perceptions of status and prestige in the general breakdown of July 1914. The importance of prestige is a central consideration in Great Power decision-making. Yet it is extraordinarily difficult to make even rough estimations of the extent to which questions of prestige inhibit crisis management. In 1914 Germany and Austria-Hungary were determined to maintain their status in Europe. Both Russia and France were willing to accept war, even a world war, rather than a blow to their prestige. The importance attached to prestige clearly limited the chances for a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

Finally, it is tempting to speculate on the broader implications of Stevenson’s conclusions for historians interested in the origins of the two world wars. Of particular interest is his assertion that the Russian recovery of 1909-1910 was crucial to everything that followed. Some scholars have interpreted the period from 1914 to 1945 as a crisis of international capitalism. Others have characterized it as the death throes of traditional European imperialism. A more widespread view, however, is that the period was a “thirty year European civil war” in which Germany made two bids for European domination. This approach has spawned endless debates over the question of “continuity” in German foreign policy as well as heated arguments over the primacy of domestic versus foreign policy. But, as popular as “the German question” has been with scholars of this period, one could just as easily argue that it was the rise of Rus-

sia in this period which really overturned the European states system. Stevenson demonstrates in the most convincing terms that it was the “overbearing sense of Russia’s power” which preoccupied Kaiser Wilhelm, Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg and other key decision-makers in Berlin in 1914. The emergence of Russia forced policy-making elites within both Germany and Austria-Hungary into a difficult choice. They could either accept Russian predominance in eastern Europe and the Balkans or they could run the risk of war in an attempt to establish firm control over this region. In this sense, and perhaps in this sense alone, there is a clear parallel between German foreign policy in 1914 and in 1941. Obsession with the same geo-political threat underpinned Hitler’s determination to destroy Soviet power and to establish the basis for a new German empire in European Russia.

Viewed from a relatively long-term perspective, therefore, it is perhaps necessary to give as much weight

to the “Russian problem” as to the “German question” when interpreting of the origins of the two world wars. The intention here is not to rehabilitate the tired anti-Soviet shibboleths of the Cold War period. It is instead to underline the profound structural changes that the emergence of Russia as a modern industrial power meant for the international system. We would do well to reflect on this question at a time when China appears poised to present the states system with a similar challenge sometime in the early part of the twenty-first century. It is perhaps superfluous to reiterate, by way of conclusion, that David Stevenson has written an important, thought-provoking book and set a standard by which others of its kind will be measured.

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